

Episode 2x11 – Shadowwww.firefly-tvs.com**Air Date:** 16 June, 2006**Writers:** Sophie Richard & Van Donovan**Episode Producer:** Michelle Makariak and Jen Hook**Art and Animation:** Loketari**Proofreader & Researcher:** Michelle Makariak (Michmak)**Opening & Closing Tiles by:** Taerowyn**Web/PDF Production:** Kendall Jung

"Over here, little man!" Jayne called, arms stretched out to catch the hoopball just as Wash hurdled it across the cargo bay toward him. Once in possession of the ball, Jayne ducked his head and made a beeline toward Mal and Zoe, hoping to breach their defenses in order to score.

"Oh, you are *not* gettin' through this," Mal crowed, guarding the side as Zoe stepped in front of Jayne, forcing him to either dodge or slam straight into her.

"Simon!" Jayne shouted, passing the ball on to him. "Make us proud, doc!" Simon had agreed to play, despite his still-healing leg, and was making a decent show, though he wasn't tremendously mobile.

To his credit, Simon actually caught the projectile. For a second he looked like a deer in headlights, clutching the ball in surprise. Then he snapped out of his reverie and stretched up, his body forming a fluid line as he threw the ball up, overhead. It sailed effortlessly through the air, arcing right through the hoop.

His teammates erupted in a cacophony of cheers, and River, beaming with delight, switched sides long enough to join them. Wash slapped him approvingly on the back. "Great shot!" he called. Simon looked as though he wasn't quite clear on what had just happened, but remembered to smile at Wash's praise.

The cheering was suddenly cut short as a strange loud clanking suddenly resounded above them. The horrid screeching of metal on metal pierced the silence that followed.

"Kaylee!" Mal shouted, as loudly as he could, lifting his head to look for her. There was no answer save the echo of his voice off the walls of the cargo bay.

"That did not sound good," Wash observed nervously. "Did that sound not good to anyone else?"

"Why ain't little Kaylee here playin', anyhow? She never misses a good game," Jayne said, wiping sweat off of his face with his forearm.

"Hell if I know," Mal muttered. "All right, get this all cleared away. Gonna go play hide an' seek with my mechanic, instead." He spoke without any of his usual lightness, his face irate and tense.

As Mal stalked away from the crew, heading up the stairs to search for his mechanic, he heard Zoe say, "Girl just ain't been right, last few days."

"Kaylee!" he called, ignoring the dread he felt building in the pit of his stomach. He didn't want to deal with a sullen mechanic, and he especially didn't want to think about what it was she was sullen over.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he peered down the corridor to the engine room. "Where the hell are you, girl?" Receiving no answer from the engine room, he looked forlornly down the opposite direction, through the kitchen into the passenger quarters and wondered if he actually wanted to deal with Kaylee in her room.

"I pay you to do more than sulk, you know!" he called loudly in that direction, then turned around. Maybe looking around the cargo bay would at least give him a decent idea of what it was he needed to yell at her about when she came out to be yelled at. It had sounded, anyway, like it might be originating somewhere around there.

He strode back down to the cargo bay, where the hoop and ball had both been put away, the crew all scattered. He'd not precisely been in the best mood for the last few days, box full of money notwithstanding, so it wasn't much wonder that they wanted to be elsewhere when he actually had something to be in a temper about.

Standing in the middle of the cargo bay, he closed his eyes, trying to remember where the sound had seemed to originate. He turned once, remembering, then strode forward. There he encountered one of the false walls. With minimal effort, he pried the panel off it and was surprised to find a crate neatly stuffed inside when he peered in. He had horrible visions for a moment of them having failed to deliver a full load last time they'd been transporting, but a very little thought convinced him that that couldn't be right. "The hell is this?"

There was no answer from his errant crew, so Mal turned the crate over, finding the words *Active Agricultural Product* stamped on the side; it looked to be Alliance goods. His brow furrowed even more. He set the crate aside, then moved to pull off another panel of grating, encountering another crate.

He continued methodically until every cache in the cargo bay was opened, and every single one of them had revealed a crate, stamped in just the same manner. How the hell could a very large—and probably very expensive—quantity of cargo have gotten on his ship without him knowing? Hell, he hadn't even been away from the ship in days, not since he'd gone to do a deal for some new pieces on the space station near Santo. That had been just before Zoe had gotten back—a kind of gamble that she would come back safely with the cash.

"Enough is enough," Mal grunted. He turned around, located one of the many crowbars they had around, and turned back to pry open one of the crates. He kicked the wooden lid aside and frowned down at the bag of fresh seeds he encountered. The label read *Carrots*. "*Gan ni niang*, don't tell me..."

He moved to the next crate, prying it open. Inside he found more of the same. "That son of a bitch," he muttered. Turning around, he bellowed, "Jayne!"

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Zoe was first to respond, though she'd not been summoned, curious at the noise. She paused at the top of the stairs. "What on earth is all this, sir? You take on a job while I was away?"

"I did not," Mal said tightly, a headache simmering behind his eyes. "Jayne!"

Jayne appeared at the top of the stairs, running like he thought there was something amiss. It wasn't until he saw all the crates pulled from their hiding holes that his speed diminished and he

skidded to a halt. The glare in Mal's eyes was venomous. "I can explain, Mal," Jayne quickly said.

"Can you?" Mal said coldly. "Can you explain to me why there is a whole lot of incredibly valuable cargo on my ship that I know nothing about? More importantly, can you explain it before I shoot you?"

Jayne looked fearfully at Zoe, but found no solace in her eyes. "You shoot me, you ain't never gonna know who you got t'deliver them to," he said pointedly. He glanced quickly to his right, as a flicker of movement announced Wash's arrival.

"I don't believe I've got to deliver this contraband to anyone, seeing as I ain't ever contracted for this job! I was gone, Zoe was gone, so maybe you'd like to tell me why exactly you thought it was up to you to go and hire us out, Jayne." Mal crossed his arms over his chest.

Jayne squared his shoulders, looking almost proud. "It's a gorram good job, Mal. Look at all them seeds, all worth cold hard cash. Ain't got nothing to do but deliver 'em, too. Figured you'd be glad." He offered a smile. "Was gonna tell you 'ventually."

"Really. And what would you have done if I'd picked up a different job on the space station, hmm?" Mal demanded.

Zoe sighed. "Sir, this is pointless. He's not gonna get—"

"Oh, he'll get it if I have to beat it into his thick skull." Mal's voice was hard and angry, as it hardly ever was when he spoke to Zoe.

Jayne's eyes reflected a bit of his nervousness, though his stature remained proud and poised. "Yeah, but you didn't. We ain't had a job since we hawked that laser gun. Not that we didn't get a pretty penny for it, but this one was right there for the taking." He shrugged, not understanding why Mal was so upset. "Figured you'd be happy for the work."

"We just got rid of the Lassiter two days ago, Jayne. Your cut burn a hole in your pocket since then? Now where the hell is this cargo supposed to be? And if it's at the ass-end of the 'verse, we're gonna be havin' some words." Mal began climbing the stairs towards Jayne. They were headed back towards the rim, without any specific destination. Mal had just thought it a good idea to get the hell out of the Core before Bai Lin came up with any other clever ideas about how to retrieve her funds.

Jayne looked at Zoe again, but found her still unyielding. A glance to Wash resulted in just a helpless shrug. He was on his own. "Ain't real far. Some moon called Charon. Guess them folk really need the produce. Sure was willing to pay a lot of coin to have it delivered." He narrowed his eyes as Mal approached. "Why you so upset 'bout this? It's good money. Honest, even."

In a few long strides, Mal reached Jayne, grabbing him and shoving him brutally against the rails. "Charon? And who gave you authority to do this, huh, Jayne? Did you wave Zoe and get her permission? Cause you sure as hell didn't ask me!"

Jayne's eyes widened at the assault, but he didn't resist, at least not yet. "Well it was supposed t'be a surprise, Mal! Figured a job'd fallin' in your lap would cheer you up."

"Cheer me up?" He paused, not even sure where to go from there.

Zoe interrupted before Mal could go off on another rant. "Sir, ain't much other way for folks on Charon to get those seeds. Alliance don't deliver that far out, and you know most trade ships don't stop—"

"Maybe there's a reason for that!" Mal snapped, letting Jayne go and turning to look at Zoe, his face pale with anger. "Ever think about that?"

"Look," Jayne cut in, trying to spare Zoe Mal's wrath because it was his fault. "Figured it was on our way. You and Zoe was gone, the wave came in, and me being third in command, figured it'd be all right to take it. The hell's the big deal?"

"Third in command?" Mal gave a short, barking laugh. "There is no third in command! You know why? Because everyone here who ain't me or Zoe is incompetent. Last time you decided you was in command, I found your ass collapsed on the stairs where the rest of the crew *dropped* you!"

Jayne managed to shake Mal off at last, drawing up even straighter at the insult, his method of coping. He cast a dark glare to Wash, but the pilot had lowered his eyes and seemed to be brooding over the comment on his own. "You don't want the job, then don't take it," Jayne practically spat. "No skin off my back, you ungrateful *hundan*." He maneuvered his way past, stalking off.

"It isn't out of our way, sir," Zoe quietly said after Jayne had left. Her gaze was steady, trying to draw Mal into reasonable behavior.

Mal grunted, not precisely answering, and turned to gaze down at the crates strewn all over the floor of the cargo bay. He was silent for a long time, then finally said, "Get that stuff stowed away."

"Yes, sir." Zoe, understanding what that meant, nodded at Wash. "Course for Charon, then."

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Simon lightly rapped on the hatch to Kaylee's room. He found it unsettling that the girl had missed the game of hoopball, and was surprised she hadn't surfaced at all the yelling, particularly as a fair portion of it had been aimed at her. "Kaylee?" he called softly. "It's me, Simon. May I come in? I'm . . . we missed you at the game today."

"Just...I'm busy, is all," Kaylee called through the door, uncertainly, not getting up off her bed. "I'll be out later."

Simon thought about mentioning that she apparently wasn't busy fixing whatever had the captain shouting, but decided not to. Kaylee was hard enough for him to talk to on her best days, and this quite plainly wasn't one of them. "Is it something I can help with?" he settled on, finally, lamely.

"No," she called back. "No, I'm . . . I'm bathing, Simon. But thanks."

Her voice sounded final, and Simon stood there before her door for some time, confused and a little at loss as to what to do now. Was this one of those times when he was supposed to persist, like when River tried to push him away, but screamed herself sick if he actually left?

In her room, Kaylee shifted on her bed, drawing her legs closer to her chest. She reached out to turn up the music she had piping in to her room through the Cortex, and then resumed doing nothing more than just hugging her knees and sighing.

Mal glared at Simon as he approached the crew corridor, in search of a proper target for his anger, which Kaylee very plainly was. "Doc, don't I pay you to do *something* on this ship?"

Simon's mind quickly ran through a list of tasks, but it wasn't his week to cook or wash up, and the garbage had been dealt with that morning. "Would you like a thorough physical?" he demanded dryly.

"Probably 'bout time for one," Mal said rather glumly. "Kaylee in there?" he added, and without waiting for a reply pounded his fist on her hatch. "Kaylee, open up in there. I been all over this ship looking for you. You can sulk later."

Simon moved away, shaking his head. If the captain was in that sort of mood, Kaylee probably wouldn't want any witnesses to this conversation. It was just slightly better to have the captain tear you apart verbally in private.

Kaylee opened up the hatch, poking out her wan, unhappy face. "Sorry, Cap. Didn't know you wanted me."

"Something's wrong with Serenity." He gauged the reaction on her face. "Heard some loud bangs and scraping in the cargo bay a bit ago." His tone seemed tense, as though he were disappointed she hadn't noticed something wrong with the ship on her own.

"Oh." Kaylee thought about that for a moment, some of his tension transferring itself to her. "She prob'ly just needs a little oil or something," she said, but climbed out of her bunk properly anyway. "Where in the cargo bay?" she asked, blinking a little bit, as the lights in her bunk had been a good bit dimmer.

Mal stared at her, then waved his hand. "Up, somewhere. I don't know. That's what I hired you for: to figure this stuff out so I don't have to."

She nodded. "Kay." She glanced up at him, as though expecting him to say something more, but it didn't seem like he was going to. Maybe he didn't know what to say. Just like she hadn't known what to say to Simon, so maybe it was all fair.

Mal stepped aside to let her go, and when she did, he watched her. Before she turned the corner to slip down to the cargo bay, he said, "Best get over it fast. She ain't coming back."

Kaylee turned, giving him a last, woeful look, then went down to the cargo bay to try and see what was wrong with Serenity.



"Why's the capt'n so upset 'bout goin' to Charon, anyway?" Kaylee curiously asked, setting flatware at the table in preparation for dinner.

Zoe's face was drawn tight as she fished plates out of the cabinet, unwilling to explain. Wash, on the other hand, felt the crew had a right to know. Glancing from Kaylee to Simon and River, who were sitting at the table patiently, he expanded, settling down in a seat at the table. "Shadow is Mal's home world."

"It was destroyed, in the war," Simon added. "Charon is one of moons that survived."

Kaylee put a hand to her mouth, stunned at the revelation, letting the gravity of the information sink in. "How awful. He must hate havin' t' go back and see it all broken."

Heavy, approaching feet made everyone drop his or her voices, but it was only Jayne arriving, looking sweaty from his workout. Apparently he'd caught the tail end of the conversation.

"Reckon y'all better shut up too, 'less the captain hears you gabbin' on 'bout it. Know he ain't like t' take well to your pity."

"Man's got a point." Mal's tone was as hard as his face as he appeared in the archway from the crew quarters. "Don't want to hear another gorram word on it," he added darkly. His eyes darted quickly to Wash and Zoe, something accusatory in their depths.

What followed was another long, tense dinner, the only kind they seemed to have since Inara had left. Mal still insisted on sit-down meals with the whole crew, but even he was starting to wonder if that was the best idea, with Wash and Kaylee sulking over being berated, Jayne glowering at him, River looking uneasy and refusing to talk, and only Simon and Zoe maintaining any semblance of normalcy.

Kaylee, head down, began clearing away the dishes, and River, who had been fidgeting all through the meal, glanced at Mal nervously. "Here," she said finally, dragging out a bundle of knitting from beneath her chair and shoving it at the captain.

Mal grabbed the bundle reflexively, but held it out before him like he'd just had a dead cat thrust upon him. "The hell is this?" he gruffly asked.

River bit her lip, pulling her knees up to her chest. "Sweater," she said tersely, not looking at him. "For you."

"Is that what you've been knitting, River?" Simon said, smiling at his sister, who nodded briefly, then hid again behind her unruly hair.

Mal examined the bundle a little more carefully. "That's what you're calling this piece of go se?" He found the arms and stretched the sweater out. The lighting was dim in the galley, but he didn't think it was playing tricks on the hideous mottled array of colors River had used to knit the sweater. The garment seemed lumpy and far too large for him, as well. "Know blind third-graders who can knit better than this," he chided.

River's face hadn't been precisely bright to begin with, but it darkened more at his words. "Had to use old socks. Not allowed off the ship, to go to market, so I found them." She fidgeted more, looking as though she'd like to simply disappear.

"Thought it smelled like feet," Jayne snorted.

River gave him a look. "Washed them first."

"It's very sweet of you, River," said Simon, surreptitiously trying to see if any of his own socks had ended up in the sweater, and wondering why she'd given it to Mal of all people.

"Because he's the coldest," she whispered, turning to smile at Simon as she answered his unspoken thought.

"Real nice, honey," Zoe added. "Maybe you could knit us some socks now that we ain't got any left," she teased gently.

"Ain't got no use for a sweater, girl, 'specially not one ugly as that." He rose from the table, clearly intended to excuse himself. "Can't figure out why just 'cause we're stuck flying through the piss ass end of space everything we own has to be made of shit too." Throwing the sweater back at her, he added, "Would think your genius brain could knit nicely, like normal folk. Then again, you ain't exactly normal; ain't a one of us on this gorram boat is normal."

River's fingers clutched the sweater tightly, and she ignored the anger on Simon's face to gaze at Mal, wide-eyed. "It ain't love if it's perfect, Malcolm," she said softly, her usually precise voice softened with the hint of a drawl.

The creases on Mal's face softened just a touch at her words and he blinked several times to clear his thoughts. It was nothing, he knew, just a slip of words, but damn him if the girl hadn't sounded an echo of his mother in that moment.

River rose, still gripping the sweater, and shook off Simon as she went back to her quarters, stroking the fuzzy patch that had been the product of her favorite socks in her agitation, trying to find some comfort.

Mal had intended to retire early to his room, but instead the rest of the crew had slipped away, leaving him alone in the wide-open galley. He sank back down into his chair at the head of the table, allowing his eyes to unfocus as he stared at the dimly lit table before him.



He was ten-years-old, brandishing a broken slingshot to his bright-eyed mother. "Timmy keeps makin' these stupid slingshots," he lamented. "Wouldn't be so bad, 'cept he keeps givin' 'em to me like he 'spects me to be able to use 'em." He tried to pull the band back, but the wood splintered. "Wish he'd stop."

Hannah Reynolds paused in her cooking. Laying down her spoon, she covered up the pot of soup and moved to sit at the kitchen table. "Come here, Malcolm." Her voice was gentle, with just a hint of sternness.

Mal followed reluctantly, climbing up to sit on a chair opposite her. When she put her hand out, he knew to place the slingshot into it. "But it's broke," he warned.

"Gathered that, son." She rose, moving to rummage in a drawer for some toothpicks and duck tape. "That Bob's boy Timmy? Boy sure does like you, you know."

"Yeah," he replied. "But he's eight," Mal added distastefully. He watched his mother's hands working curiously. "He only likes me 'cause his dad works for you. He ain't no good; I was making better slingshots than that when I was four."

She sat down again, using a ring of toothpicks and tape to shore up the faulty structure of the slingshot. "Well, Lord knows you don't give him any other reason to like you," she said, fairly severely. "You know how ungrateful you sound right now, young man?"

Mal sat on his hands, staring shamefully down at his knees. "I'm sorry, Mama. Still, seems like he could do better to get me to like him than give me a bunch of broken things."

"It ain't love if it's perfect, Malcolm," she said, more gently. She moved around the table to stand beside him. "You look at those socks you're wearin', which your mama knitted for you special. Ain't perfect like you'd get in a store, are they?"

Mal stretched out his feet, looking at the bit of socks he could see peeking out from under his boots. "No, ma'am," he agreed. "They're better, 'cause you made 'em."

"s right." She kissed the top of his head, then placed the mended slingshot in his hand. "You try and get on better with Timmy. After all, you're gonna be a pretty lonely boy if you decide you're too good to get on with your family, dong ma?"

Mal marveled over the neatly repaired slingshot. Pulling back the band to test its durability, he grinned. He twisted in his seat to look at his mother, smiling. "Guess you're right," he said. With a wink, he added, "As usual."

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"Thought you'd be long gone by now, sir."

Zoe's voice startled Mal out of his memory, and he quickly got to his feet. "Was just going," he replied, glancing between his first mate and her husband.

Putting her hands on her hips, Zoe said, "We just finished storing the last of the cargo, sir. You can rest easy."

The implication was that she could handle the job, if Mal couldn't, but he ignored her. He just nodded his head and disappeared down the corridor.

"Yeah, if we're not too incompetent," Wash muttered under his breath when the captain was gone.

Zoe sighed. "Baby, please not tonight," she whispered, leaning against him. Things had been better since she'd gotten back from Santo, but not much. It hadn't taken more than a day before he wanted to know every single thing that had happened there, and some of it, he just didn't need to know. And Wash's fit about the entire job had poisoned days before she'd left.

"I just want to know what is it about this job that's got him so on edge. It's not like it's the planet we picked Inara up on or anything."

She rolled her eyes. "No, Wash, it's a moon on a system completely destroyed by the Alliance during the war. Hell, do you think *I'm* too happy to be going through there?"

Wash studied her for a moment as his brain went over the star charts he had just plotted. Charon was one of the moons of- "Oh. Shadow." His expression darkened. That was Mal's home world, and remembering that explained a lot. "Hey, I never claimed to be terribly astute, did I?" He offered a small, apologetic smile, slipping an arm around her waist. "I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes, leaning against him rather heavily. "It's okay," she whispered, stroking one of his cheeks. "He'll just have to get through it, like we all do. Just...don't be too hard on him till this is done?"

There were a multitude of things he would like to complain about, but he didn't. Instead, he just smiled and kissed her softly. "I'll be better than good, Zo'. I'll be helpful."

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The ship was dark and still as Kaylee wandered it, trying to will herself into her normal calm, receptive state. If there was something wrong—something really wrong—she should be able to hear it, just feel it. Her thoughts were distracted, though, and though she moved aimlessly, trying to follow the flow of energy in the ship, her heart wasn't in it.

Serenity had gotten so empty. It hadn't used to be like that. Before, there was always someone about. Every corner of the ship had reflected welcome to her; there wasn't a spot on the ship without someone to greet her with a smile. Now, with the captain being so angry, and so many being gone, it seemed everyone was determined to weather out the storm separately, with none of the communion and happiness of days past.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. It was just a low sound. She could hear it, dimly, and she went all over the ship trying to find it, even crawling in the ducts, but it did no good. All she could see was what wasn't there anymore, and never would be again.



For the most part, Mal kept to himself, trying even subconsciously to avoid his exposure to the rest of his crew. Still, he had to eat eventually, and it was late and the ship quiet, so he expected not to encounter anyone on his trip to the galley.

Finding the entire crew there relaxing and drinking some of Kaylee's horrible wine there instead did nothing to assuage his annoyance. "I swear I must have the laziest gorram crew in the 'verse." His eyes flickered between each of them, finally resting on Kaylee. "You figure out what made that sound yet?"

Kaylee looked up, her face guilty. She'd actually been enjoying herself for the first time in a week, until he came in. "I...lubed up all the parts I could think of. One of the pistons was runnin' a little dry, so it mighta been that. Hard to tell, 'less I can find where the sound is coming from." She nudged one of the chairs towards him hopefully with her foot, wishing he would sit down, stop being the captain, and be Mal, just for a little while.

Mal glanced at the chair darkly, but for the moment said nothing. Instead his eyes drifted over the faces of his crew. Zoe and Wash were looking expectantly at him, as though hoping he'd join. Simon was staring down at his cup, seeming guilty for enjoying himself. Jayne appeared to not have even noticed Mal's arrival, and River was knitting, or perhaps just holding the sweater in her lap. They had been laughing and talking before he had arrived, and now they were sitting sullenly. If he sat down, they wouldn't start smiling and laughing again, and he knew it.

He wasn't supposed to join in their fun, not right now. "What I heard wasn't no lack of oil, Kaylee. You'd better go check again, see if you can't figure out what came loose." He looked to Jayne. "We're landing pretty soon. You'd better double check to see that your precious cargo is properly secured." His eyes alighted on Wash, but before he could say anything, Wash put up a hand.

"I'll check to make sure we're still on course." Wash managed a smile and nodded to Zoe. "C'mon, babe, you can finish your story in the cockpit."

"Come on, River," Simon said, not wanting to wait to be singled out for his idleness for the second time in as many days. "Time to get you to bed."

River stood docilely enough, but glanced back over her shoulder anxiously. "He's cold," she insisted, hands twisting in the jumbled knit.

Mal let them go, watching them fade into the depths of the ship out of the corners of his eyes. Soon he was left with only Kaylee, who seemed to have been waiting for him to say something. Lifting his eyes, he focused them on her, his gaze unyielding. "Thought I told you to find that problem."

"Yes, sir," she said unhappily, standing up. She nudged the jug of wine towards him. "We was savin' you some," she said, then went to see if she couldn't wriggle into the duct leading into the cargo bay. Could be the problem was there, if there really was one.

Several long moments passed while Mal stared down at the jug of wine. It housed everything he couldn't be inside it. There was no room for carefree or happy, nor for the luxury of relaxation.

Resenting that he couldn't be what the rest of the crew wanted him to be, and so easily were themselves, he picked the jug up and hurled it across the room.

The clay pot smashed into shards, spraying bright red wine all over.

In the cockpit, Zoe's head jerked up at the sound of something smashing. "Hell." She unseated herself from her husband's knee. "Reckon I better go make sure we still have a kitchen in the morning." She looked tired—in truth, she'd had enough of placating and calming.

Wash hadn't heard the sound, but it didn't take him long to figure out what had happened. "Hey," he said, rising. Putting a hand on her arm, he stilled her. "Let me try?" Off her skeptical expression, he gave a smile. "I promise I'll behave."

She relaxed a little. "Just don't do anything so I have to wake up the doc, all right?"

"Well, that depends on Mal," he teased. Nodding, he moved forward to kiss her. "Don't worry. I'll bow out if it gets hairy."

He walked with her to their quarters and then took a deep breath before she slipped down the hatch. "Wish me luck?"

She gave him a long, slow kiss, heated and hungry. "That do you?"

Wash's grin was brilliant. "I promise not to be long." He smacked at her playfully, watched as she slipped into their quarters, and then continued down the hall and back into the galley.

Quick assessment of the room revealed that the jug of atrocious-tasting wine they'd all been so thoroughly enjoying minutes ago was now smashed into the wall. "It didn't taste that bad," he chided kindly. Not waiting for a welcome, he went to get some rag to mop the mess up with.

Mal rubbed his forehead, staring down at a pot full of cold, congealed protein. "Thought I told you to go check the course." He tried to decide if the rumbling in his stomach was worth trying to put the stuff in his mouth.

"I did," Wash cheerfully replied, ignoring Mal for the most part as he wiped the spill up. "I suppose I could go check again, but I doubt we've deviated in five minutes." After he wiped up all the liquid, Wash carefully placed the broken shards onto the rag. "You sure did a number on the pot."

Mal shrugged. "Shoddy craftsmanship. Don't suppose there's anything left that's actually palatable?"

Wash straightened, carefully holding the broken pieces before him. "I suppose that depends on your definition of palatable." He carried the rag to the trash receptacle and dumped the shards.

"Anything not prepared by anyone on this ship, apparently," Mal muttered, pushing the pot aside. "Isn't someone supposed to be doing dishes? Correct me if I'm wrong, but we do wash the pots, not just keep throwing in fresh protein and hoping it gets better?" He slammed the plate that had been covering the pot into the sink, nearly causing it to shatter as well.

Wash quickly took the plate away from Mal, setting it in the sink to wash it. "Hey, I'm a fairly competent cook, you know. I could whip you something up." He eyed the protein in the pot. "Better than that, at any rate." Wrinkling his nose, he added, "I think we really should enroll Simon in some cooking classes."

"Have to enroll him in 'finding your ass with both hands' class first," Mal snapped, thwapping a spoon against the counter irately in a maddening tattoo. "What are you doin' here? Zoe punishing us or something?"

Wash scowled at the remark, but quickly quelled his irritation. "I came of my own free will. Heard some commotion in here and thought I'd see what it was." He studied Mal's profile, aware of the darkness that seemed to be exuding from him. It was so tangible as to be nearly repellant. There were a plethora of things he thought of to say to Mal, but none of them seemed apt. "I can leave if you'd prefer."

Mal tossed the spoon in after the plate. "Zoe...she didn't hear?" His tone was somewhere between annoyed and pitiful. He paused, trying to imagine a situation so bleak that even Zoe wouldn't come after him. It pulled him up short.

For a moment Wash felt a pang of regret for not letting Zoe see to Mal. They had a bond that Wash could never pretend to have with Mal. If anyone could understand the captain, or make things better, it would be her. "She did, but I convinced her to let me come instead. Thought it might be easier."

"Easier. Right." Mal turned away, pacing down the short length of the galley. "There somethin' you want, Wash? Some job you'd like to kick up a fuss over, or something I said to your wife that don't sit exactly right with you?" Heaven knew that was the only time Wash ever did have anything to say to him.

Wash busied himself with the dishes, forcing himself not to let Mal's temper draw a rise out of him. Somehow he felt that perhaps that was exactly what Mal needed--to rip into someone and let it all out--but he was going to try to stave that off as best he could, if possible. "Look, I'm just trying to be competent here. But all you do is complain, no matter how hard we work. Someday, we're going to stop trying, and you won't be able to do everything by yourself."

Mal snapped at that, stalking towards his quarters, ignoring the emptiness that gnawed at his insides. "On that day, I doubt I'll notice much of a difference."

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Mal's face was hard and set as he urged Honey forwards. She was his mare, his own that his mother had let him raise from a foal and taught him to train and care for. Now they said she was sick, but Mal knew better. Honey was strong—there was nothing wrong with her that wouldn't get better soon enough. They just had to get far enough away from the ranch, so no one would find her, and then she could get better...

Bob was wrong; his mother was wrong--Honey was going to make it, with or without their help. She had him, and that was all she needed. He thought her gait felt strong and sure beneath him. Her strides were long and loping, her flanks warm and her mane soft. So intent was he on getting her to a safe haven so he could properly care for her that he didn't notice her slowing. She came to a halt as the sun was setting. "C'mon, girl," Mal urged, not yet grasping the gravity of the situation. "Just a bit futher. C'mon." He clicked his heels, trying to spur her on.

It didn't take too long, though for him to catch her labored breathing. He slid down immediately, feeling awful for having ridden her, even bareback without the heavy saddle. "Honey, girl..." She nosed at him helplessly, and Mal gritted his teeth. "Just...just walk. We'll walk from here." He continued, leading her in a slow amble up towards the top of the ridge—once they were out of the valley, they'd surely be safe, and then Honey could catch her breath and get better.

The fresh wind hit Mal in the face as they crested the rise, and he drank in it like salvation. Turning to share his renewal with his horse, his heart sank: Honey's head was bent, her eyes clouded over. Her breath still came ragged, to the point that her sides heaved with the strain of it. "Honey," he croaked, reaching out to try to lift her head. "Honey, no. No."

"God damn—" He bit his tongue as soon as the words had come out. His mother might not be around, but every time he took the Lord's name in vain, he couldn't see anything but her face. Driven to inarticulation in his grief, he pressed his face against Honey's sweat-slicked withers, pressing his eyes closed tight to try and manage the pain.

Honey seemed to sense his grief and finally raised her head, just so she could rest it on his shoulder. Mal had to laugh incredulously at that, even as the tears stung his eyes; it was as though she was comforting him. "You're a good girl," he said weakly as he stroked her nose. "Such a good girl."

He couldn't tell how long he stood there, just hanging onto her, even as darkness fell properly and the stars came out. It was only when he felt Honey shivering that he cursed himself and pulled a blanket out of his pack to wipe her down. "I'm sorry," he whispered, as it all came crashing down on him that he'd tortured Honey and dragged her up here to die, slowly and in misery. "I'm so sorry..." He looked back towards the valley helplessly, wishing now for help, for someone, anyone to come and find them.

At first he was certain it was just a trick of the lights, or his eyes failing him, but he soon realized the shadowy figure he thought he saw was actually a man. He resolved into Bob Douglas, father of his friend Timmy. The man was riding a stocky mare and sidled up to Mal and Honey without saying a word. For a while he sat there looking out at the plains and the stars. "Your mother thought I might find you out here."

Mal wouldn't meet his eyes. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "Thought...thought maybe she'd be all right. Didn't mean to hurt her." He plucked up a handful of dry grass in his agitation.

"Know you didn't mean to," he replied calmly, "But you are." He lowered his gaze to Mal, studying the teenager with sadness. "Only one kindness as can be done for her now."

"Yes, sir," Mal said wretchedly, forcing himself to stand and face Bob. "I'll...I can do it." He lifted his head to meet the older man's eyes, trying to be brave.

Bob offered a smile to the boy. Noting that he wasn't armed, he easily unclipped his pistol from his belt and offered it butt-end down to Mal. "You don't have to do this."

Mal swallowed, taking the piece. "It's my fault she's hurtin'. I should help her." He turned away, blinking hard to try and clear his eyes of tears. If he was a man, he should be able to do this. Honey was his, and it was his responsibility. Cocking the gun sounded unnaturally loud in the stillness, and Honey lifted her head to regard him. "Easy, girl," he whispered raggedly, stroking her neck. "Easy..." He waited for her head to droop again so he could line up properly. He had to do it perfectly, in a single shot.

Bob squeezed his knees together, stilling his own horse beneath him so she wouldn't spook when the gun finally fired.

Finally, Honey's head lowered again, and Mal gave her one last, lingering pat, then drew in a deep breath and brought the pistol up to aim straight between her eyes. He pulled the trigger fast, not giving himself time to think about it, because if he thought, he'd never be able to do it.

She collapsed to the earth, hard and heavy, and Mal turned away, his cheeks cold from the wind against the wet tear streaks. He dropped the pistol on the ground and started walking, not knowing or caring where he was going, only needing to get away, to be somewhere else, alone...

After stopping to retrieve his gun and to say a silent word to the deceased horse, Bob had little trouble finding Mal again. He pulled his horse into a slow walk beside him. He did not attempt to direct Mal back toward the ranch, just ambled along beside him for several long minutes.

"Learned yourself an important life lesson today, Malcolm," he said softly. "You're always gonna be losing those things you love. That's the way of life. Not an easy thing to accept, but one you must learn to face. Running away don't solve nothing; makes things worse, most times." He offered a sad smile to the boy. "It's easier with family about; don't gotta do it all alone."

"What do you know?" Mal snarled. "You didn't care about her—just told me she was like to die, but you didn't do anything to help her, to make her better." He continued walking blindly.

"You've got to learn the limits, son. Nothing lasts forever. I tried to help that horse, and you know I did. But I also knew when to let go, and when to listen to experience."

"Limits..." Mal laughed bitterly. "Limits are all anyone wants to give me, seems like. Be nice if someone'd just once let me the hell alone."

Bob drew his reins up, pulling his mare to a stop. He watched Mal keep walking. "Someday you'll regret those words, son."



"I'm getting used to it, actually," Wash said as he floated upside-down in the cockpit. One of his hands held the curve of the ladder handle, to keep him from bumping into the ceiling, but his eyes were bright as he looked across at Zoe, who was struggling to remain upright and on the floor before him. "Think of all the fun we could have in bed." His eyes glanced to the corridor before he released the rung and started to swim through the air toward their quarters. "If only we could get there . . ."

"Every action has an equal and opposite reaction," River said primly, pushing from wall to wall as she made her way serenely towards the cargo bay. She looked as though weightlessness was the only element she'd ever known or imagined. "It's not going to work."

Jayne laughed, kicking towards them, less gracefully than River, but still with a fair degree of ease. "Hell, y'all look like y'ain't ever been in zero g before."

Jayne tried out several poses, which he probably thought looked sexy but really came off as ridiculous as he floated down the stairs, in search of his weight set. "Gonna be a mess when this is all over, no mistake," he mumbled to himself.

"You're going to have it fixed soon, aren't you?" Simon asked, bobbing near the ceiling of the engine room as he watched Kaylee working. "And you'll warn us first, so we don't fall on our heads, right?" He struggled to right himself once more, before catching sight of River floating down toward the cargo bay.

"It's...gonna be fine," Kaylee said unhappily, working at the machine. She seemed steadier and more focused, though, knowing what was wrong. "Just...keep your head upwards. And if you're gonna be sick, go to the other room. Some of these parts don't react well with liquid, and it'll be all over—maybe you should get a bag?" she added, looking up.

"A bag," he echoed and glanced behind him, toward the kitchen. It loomed in the distance, seemingly a mile away. At last he managed to right himself. "I . . . I think I'll be all right." He turned back to her, managing a smile. "Providing I remain upright and my equilibrium doesn't tilt, I think I can hold my lunch down." Slowly he managed to lower himself until he was more on her level. "So . . . what exactly happened?"

"Grav boot's shot," she sighed. "Looks like it shook off a piston coupla days ago, and that damaged the heads, and...well, now we're all floatin'." She glanced over her shoulder. "Hand me the wrench there, would you?" She had her tools taped to the walls, trying to keep them in order and out of the delicate machinery.

Simon carefully studied the selection of tools available, finding the one that most resembled a wrench. He handed it down to her. "Well, at least we've still got air," he said in what he hoped was an optimistic tone.

She looked up. "Simon, we ain't in any danger, I promise. This is just...one of those little things that happens on any..." Her voice died out. This was one of those little things that happened on any ship except hers. Any other time, she'd've felt that piston breaking, sensed the heads being damaged and the gasket losing its seal. But this time...she sighed, lowering her head. "But we'll be fine," she whispered.

"Hey, it's not your fault," he said. "I mean, at least not mostly. If the Captain wasn't so stingy with the money, I'm sure this would have never happened." He gave her a smile. "Besides, I think everyone else is quite enjoying the weightlessness. I'm just not used to it. I'll be glad when we get to Charon, if for no reason other than feeling some solid earth under my feet again."

Kaylee gave him a little, sidelong smile. "Hey...maybe when we get there...you reckon' you and me could maybe—maybe do somethin'?" she said shyly, handing the wrench back to him. "Pliers."

"I'm sure there are lots of things we could do," Simon said, accepting the wrench and replacing it. It was while he was looking for the pliers that he went a bit rigid. "Only, I'm not sure Charon's exactly going to have much for us to do." After locating the pliers, he handed them over to her. "This whole planetary system was badly razed during the war, after all."

She took the pliers, bending again to her work. "But...it can't be too bad. I mean, people still live there and all, right? Must do, since they're wantin' seeds and such?"

"Well, I suppose that's true. As far as I recall from my studies, Shadow itself was made uninhabitable by the war, but many of the survivors settled on the moons. I'm sure life must be difficult out here, and the settlers just barely surviving. It must be why we're being paid so well for this cargo--no one else wants to visit a dead planet."

Kaylee bit her lip. "But...what can you do to a planet so's people can't live there? I mean, if they bombed, people could rebuild, right? And you said there was survivors..."

"By survivors I mean people who were off world when the Alliance struck. I'm not one hundred percent certain, but reports I've heard said that no one who was on the planet at the time actually survived. I really don't know, but I think it was much more than just bombs. Certain chemicals could render the soil lethal to carbon-based life. Many of those types of things have half-lives in the millions of years. I'm not even sure reterraforming the planet would work, if anyone were even interested. The survivors, what few there were, are probably doing the best they can, rebuilding on Charon instead."

"All them people, though," Kaylee whispered, distracted from her work. "Must've been plenty didn't get out in time...was there...was there lots killed?"

At first, Simon didn't replied, letting his silence speak instead. "Beyond your imagination, Kaylee. The Alliance's reputation for brutality preceded it into the war. They didn't care about the loss of lives; to them, the ends justified the means. It's why they won the war, but people supported them and accepted the brutality as a necessary evil." Somewhat shamed faced, Simon added, "I know I did. We were raised to believe the Rim worlds were run by savages; people little more civilized than apes. No one ever stopped to consider how brutal the Alliance was to them. Shadow was a food supply world—a great deal of the Independent's food stock shipped out of the planet, and to the moons. That made it a decisive target for the Alliance, and their devastation of the planet was total. The intention was to destroy the soil so completely that no further crops could be raised from it, ever. In the process, they burned the sea into steam and completely ravaged the planet, with no regard for the human lives that fell along side it."

Kaylee swallowed. "You...d'you reckon it's why the cap'n's so mad about goin' there?"

"Reckon floatin' around my gorram ship while my mechanic sits on her ass swapping tales with my doctor is why the captain's so mad. What the Cao is going on here, Kaylee? You plannin' on actually fixing this here problem or just gonna sit around all day, showing off your sensitive side to any what'll listen?"

"C-cap'n..." Kaylee couldn't even think of what to say as Mal entered the room, his face dark with anger. "I'm workin' on it, promise. Got my tools all laid out, an' Simon's helpin'..."

"Um...yes. I'm handing her the tools," Simon said, carefully and precisely. "First the wrench, then the pliers. When she's done, I tape them back to the wall."

"Well, it's pretty clear that method ain't workin'! Thought I told you there was a problem days ago, girl. You just been moping in your room since then? We ain't got time for this, Kaylee." Wagging a finger at her, Mal's tone dropped menacingly. "You can't do your one job on this boat, I can get me someone who can. Don't need no girl crying and sulking about all day, nor batting her lashes at the rest of my crew, dong ma? Now you better do your gorram job 'fore we land, or you won't have one to do at all."

"I..." Kaylee had never heard quite that tone from him before. Not addressed at her. Jayne, yes, Simon, even Zoe once. But never to her. She ducked her head, blinking. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll have it s-sorted..." She was trying to keep back the tears, but it didn't seem to be working, even though he'd just scolded her for crying, so crying in response was really bad.

Furious at Mal's treatment of Kaylee, Simon stretched to his full height, trying to balance as best he could against the zero gravity. His brows furrowed as he struggled with what to say in retort. Mal was over the line.

"You stay out of my way," Mal snarled first. He then turned and left, maneuvering down the halls with relative ease.

"Simon..." Kaylee whispered, in a soft, helpless voice, and Simon abandoned his intent to follow Mal, working his way down to take her in his arms.

"It's okay," he whispered softly and hesitantly, a little stiff, but knowing she needed contact. "He didn't mean it. It's okay."

By the time Mal reached the galley, Wash and Zoe had managed their way there too, attracted by the shouting. Zoe fixed the captain with a sad, stoic expression, but Wash easily swatted aside some floating dishes and gave Mal an easy grin. "You know, you take to firing people every time we're in a place you had a bad experience, then you're going fast wind up with no crew at all."

Mal glared at Wash. "That so? You tenderin' your resignation, or are you gonna get those things secure? Unless you *want* to clean 'em up after they smash on the floor."

Zoe silently moved towards the cupboards, beginning to try and get the dishes safely inside them.

Resignedly, Wash pulled the few items out of the air that he could reach, noting dully to himself that Mal made no attempt to do the same. His tone, when he spoke again, was serious. "I don't see how the destruction of one family is a good reason to try to break up another." Holding the dishes to his chest, he offered a sad smile. "Kaylee's like a little sister to all of us. She's the kindest person on this boat. She doesn't deserve you taking your anger out on her."

Mal's face tightened at Wash's words. "Family—what the hell would you know about what a family is, or what losin' one's like, huh? Kaylee ain't been doin' her job, ain't been listening, and it's about time she heard about it! Maybe I finally got her attention."

"Oh, there's no doubt about that. But in the process, you probably lost a lot of respect." Sighing, he shrugged. "I know enough about family to know you're going to lose yours if you keep this up."

Mal's eyes darted over to Zoe quickly. "Zoe?" His tone was still hard, but there was something in it that craved reassurance.

Her eyes lifted carefully, showing that while she had given them distance, she'd been paying close attention to the conversation. "Think we already had this conversation once before, sir."

It didn't take him long to remember what she meant. "Yeah..." Mal's voice roughened, then, and he rubbed the back of his hand over his face fitfully. "Guess so." He looked around, as though with fresh eyes. "Wash, you go make sure River keeps care of herself. Don't need a cracked skull on top of everything else around here. I'll...go make sure we're still on course," he sighed, moving towards the cockpit.

Once there, though, he didn't end up doing any checking, or much of anything except staring out into the black, realizing that for the first time in days, it seemed emptier than the space inside his ship.

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"Sir? Dispatch from command, sir," the young private said.

"Is it, now. Ain't they worked out how to find their asses with both hands for themselves yet?" Mal grinned at the boy as he took the communiqué from him.

Zoe took her eyes off the field when Mal took the call, but didn't watch him long. It wasn't until several minutes had passed and Mal hadn't said anything that she turned back to him. His expression was drawn and his skin pale. Sensing immediately that something was wrong, she rose to her feet and adjusted her rifle. "Sergeant?"

Mal swallowed. "Alliance took out a planet. Tryin' to...do away with supporters, keep them from joining up, mess up supplies..." His words came, slow and disjointed, as though he was fumbling for speech. He couldn't stop the racing inside his brain. They could have gotten away. There must have been evacuations, shuttles, something...

Zoe straightened her back, aware that there was more to this that she wasn't being told. Mal never took the news of planets being attacked well, but he never had acted like this, either.

There wasn't anger or motivation flaring in his eyes, but a sort of hollow dullness. "You mean they raided one?" The cold creeping along her spine told her it was worse than that.

"No," Mal said. His eyes were hollow. "Razed it, it says. Completely gone, just a hunk of rock in the sky." He handed her the data pad. "Go through the casualty list. Should have notes as to who's...which soldier they're related to. Then you can start telling the men. It's indexed by platoon." He blinked hard, once, twice, then three times. "Maybe you best start with ours." He forced himself to meet Zoe's gaze. She would tell him the truth, would be the only voice he'd have to believe.

Zoe scanned through the casualty list quickly, then skipped back up to the field report at the top. Sucking in her breath, she read over the name of the planet that had been razed three times before her brain accepted it as true. She'd never been to Shadow, but Mal's stories about his home had nearly transported her there in her mind. "Understood, sir," she replied. Her eyes fixed on him. "We're going to get the bastards."

"Just tell me what it says," he said numbly, needing the final confirmation of what his soul already knew. "Just tell me, corporal."

Zoe scanned down the list again, until she reached their platoon. She read over the names several times before shaking her head regretfully. In a softer tone she said, "I'm sorry sir."

"Whole ranch?" he said, trying to keep the hope out of his voice, trying to sound as though it didn't matter.

Zoe lowered the data pad, staring straight ahead. "Entire planet, sir."

Mal swallowed a few times, trying to keep down everything that needed to be kept down. He stood up, the movement clumsy and uncoordinated. "Goin' out," he muttered. "Do your job."

Zoe watched him go with narrowed eyes. She had a fair idea where he was headed, and couldn't decide if it would be better for her to leave him alone, or to make sure he was all right. Looking back at the data pad in her hands, she resolved to do the job. Then she'd find him.

And find him she did, just over an hour later, in the base bar, engaged in a brawl with men from the next platoon over. She didn't say anything, just joined him in the fight. She figured fighting would help him burn off some of his anger.

"Get out of here!" he yelled at her, holding off about three men with the leg of a chair. It had all gone quiet enough until the bartender tried to cut him off. That had been like a match into a powder keg, and now here he was.

"Think you're drunk, sir," she casually replied, ducking to avoid a punch. She scanned the bar for the military police who would undoubtedly be arriving soon.

"Yeah, but I'm still..." Mal trailed off, unable to think of what, precisely he was. Furious and driven, he whacked one of the men on the side of the head with the chair leg, but then the other two gave him the bum's rush through the door, leaving him sprawling in the dirt, running his tongue automatically over his teeth to see if he'd lost any this time. He just lay there, didn't bother getting up.

Zoe was pushed and shoved, but ultimately walked out of the bar unscathed. She stood before Mal, looking down at him in the dirt. After the brawl, she wasn't about to leave him alone. Extending a hand down to help him up, she said, "Ain't no good if you get yourself killed now, sir. Reckon their platoon leader would appreciate you not killing his men, too."

"Ain't no good anyway," he said thickly, swallowing blood. He didn't take her hand, just looked up at her. "I had a leave comin' up," he whispered, blue eyes wide and luminous with pain. "Next week."

"Alliance can destroy your home, sir, but they ain't killed you yet. You still got your life. Home's only one part of what makes that, long as you live and have the will to rebuild." She offered her hand again.

He shook his head, unwilling to return to the precarious land of the vertical. "You miss the part where my family's all dead, corporal?" He meant it to sound angry, but it didn't, just hurt.

"Didn't, sir." She lowered herself to crouch beside him. "Don't mean no disrespect." She glanced at the bar. "Reckon they'd say the same, though."

"You know what they said?" Mal laughed feebly, feeling the blood ooze out onto his chin. "Said someday I'd be sorry, for wantin' to be left alone. Boy..." He was laughing harder now, nearly hysterical. "They sure knew, didn't they? 'Get on with your family, boy, or you'll be pretty lonely.' 'You're gonna regret that.'" Tears were flooding his eyes. "Jesus...Jesus. They sure did know, didn't they?"

Zoe kept her eyes focused on the bar; looking at Mal crying was too hard. "You're not alone, sir." She forced herself to look away from the building, focusing on Mal himself. The sight of him bloodied and crying made her heart ache. "You're going to be all right."

"All right?" He leaned on her heavily. "Wasn't all right two hours ago, and I'm a gorram sight further from it than I was then." His eyes were vacant as he stared off into space, at the mercy of his grief. "What's left? What'd they leave us, Zoe? They're gonna leave us with nothin' in the end, you know that?" And that, his mind could dimly comprehend, a world where the Alliance had left him nothing at all, taken everything from them; he could see it stretching before them.

"You got me, sir," she replied. "Ain't planning on going no where soon."

Mal gave up the effort to speak anymore then, and just leaned on her, letting his tears come forth helplessly as they hadn't since he was a little boy. "They ain't gonna take you," he whispered against her shoulder, gripping her tightly. "They ain't."

Shaking her head, Zoe drew Mal close, putting an arm around him comfortingly.



It was long past her bedtime before Kaylee finally fixed the grav boot, falling and knocking her forehead painfully on the engine as it finally kicked in. The bump, and her relief, cost her a few tears that she wiped off her cheeks with grubby hands. Rest of the crew was already abed—Simon had duck-taped River in—and there was no one around to share her joy, but also no captain around to make her feel bad about it, so maybe that was just as well.

Kaylee couldn't think of what to do, but she didn't feel like going to bed. It seemed like fixing the grav boot had helped knock into place some essential part of what was wrong with her. She went into the galley and fixed herself a cup of coffee, then snuck up to the cockpit, peeking around the edge of the door first to make sure Mal wasn't there.

The cockpit was empty of both captain and pilot. The ship was set on autopilot and was still on route to Charon. Kaylee sighed in relief and sank into the pilot chair. For a few moments she simply drank in the quiet atmosphere and the beauty of the stars spread out before her. Then, wiping at her eyes again, she reached up and flipped on the transmitter, to send a wave.

It took a few minutes for it to go through, but then there she was right in front of her: Inara.
"Kaylee! It's so good to see you!"

"Hey. You ain't—ain't busy, are you? I just...the grav boot broke. And then I fixed it. An' everyone's asleep," Kaylee said, in an illogical rush, tears flooding to her eyes again.

Inara's brilliant smile suddenly faded away as she took in Kaylee's tear-streaked cheeks, and the wavering tone of her voice. "Of course I'm not busy, *mei-mei*. It's a delight to see you. What's Mal done now?"

"It was my fault," Kaylee said slowly. "He told me, 'bout the sound, but I didn't know what it was, an' then the heads got damaged, and we was all floatin' for the rest of the day, an' he..." Kaylee looked down, feeling disloyal, even through the anger she still felt at the captain.

"It's not your fault that Mal is too cheap to keep the ship stocked with new parts, Kaylee. Besides, you fixed it." Her smile returned. "You always fix whatever is wrong. There's no need for tears."

"I shoulda paid more attention, though. He was just...I never seen him that mad, not with me. Said he'd get a different mechanic, someone who'd do the job right. And he weren't wrong...most times, I woulda caught this straight off, but I been missin' you so much," Kaylee confessed.

"Oh, Kaylee," Inara breathed. She was touched by Kaylee's words, but also unsettled. That Kaylee missed her so much as to be making mistakes in her work wasn't good. "Mal would never replace you. You must know that. Even when he's being a jerk, he cares about you. Everyone does." Smiling brighter, she wistfully said, "That's what I miss about Serenity. She really was home."

"Then how come you—" Kaylee bit her lip. She wasn't going to get an answer to that. She'd been asking it since Inara had announced that she was going to leave, and it had never been answered. "She misses you too," Kaylee mumbled, finally.

Inara's smile remained, and her tone was sweet and gentle. "I'm sorry I missed the grav boot being broken. It must have been quite the sight to see everyone floating about. It sounds quite fun, really."

"Well, not so much for me," Kaylee said. "But River liked it real well. Simon almost got sick a coupla times, and Wash and Zoe..." Kaylee leaned forward, detailing the days events, relaxing in the chance to share them with a friend, all her sorrow finally leaving her as somehow, things clicked into place in her mind as surely as they had in the engine.

By the time Inara finally had to sign off, Kaylee was in higher spirits. She wasn't feeling entirely better, but she had stopped crying and certainly had improved some. She sighed and rose from the pilot chair. It was late and she was weary.

As she stepped out of the cockpit, she was surprised to see River waiting for her, sitting on the steps leading down to the crew quarters. "River," she said. "You been waiting here long?"

River looked up at her. "No. It took too long to get out of bed." She still bore bits of the sticky gray tape on her nightgown. "I'm sorry."

Kaylee's mouth twitched a bit at the comment, almost smiling, aware that Simon had actually taped River into bed; he'd borrowed the tape from her. "You ain't got nothin' to be sorry for, River," she said, settling herself down on the stairwell beside her.

River shook her head. "If Simon had had a normal sister, a girl, she could have been your friend and lightened your sorrow. One who could knit better," she added absently, twisting her hands together just a little.

Surprised at the confession, Kaylee shook her head and immediately wrapped an arm around the slight girl. "Don't be silly, River." She hugged her tightly. "You're more than good enough to be my friend." She smiled at her, and the smile was genuine and warm. "I just get silly sometimes. Too sensitive." She squeezed River again. "You're not normal maybe, but you're still my friend. My best friend even."

River leaned against Kaylee tentatively, head resting on her shoulder. "Then I left you alone too long. Shouldn't have to be sorry alone." She closed her eyes, relaxing just fractionally. "He loves us. But he's sorry alone, most of the time."

Kaylee smiled tightly, nodding. "Guess I knew that. Can't be easy, him goin' home to what's left." She took a deep breath. "All the more reason we got t'make sure he knows he ain't alone. Ain't none of us alone."

River's eyes opened hazily to stare at nothing. "He's starting to remember. Won't be long now, I promise."

Closing:

At breakfast the next day, Mal noticed that everyone seemed to be walking on eggshells around him. The conversation was subdued and people left as soon as they were finished. Mal watched everyone throughout the meal, noting how no one met his eye, save Wash, who was the only one trying to lighten the mood.

When breakfast was cleared away and everyone had left, Mal pulled himself to his feet and took a deep breath. Things were bad, but they weren't as bad as they could have been. They were still flying, and wasn't that enough? He walked down the corridor and stopped inside the doorway to the engine room. He stroked the door fondly, watching Kaylee for a moment, then cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Kaylee, turned, biting her lip a little. "Shouldn't need much to make her good as new," she said, apologetically. "Won't cost much, and..." She drew a deep breath. "And you can take it out of my cut."

"Ain't why I'm here, girl," he said simply. Without looking at her, he continued. "Haven't been myself much, these past few days. Maybe been treating them on this crew unjust like." He shifted his gaze to look at her. There was regret in his eyes. "Ain't never meant to make you cry."

At his words, brushing, albeit gently, on the wound that was still raw, Kaylee's eyes welled up again, and she stared down at the floor. "You—weren't wrong. Should've listened and heard where she was achin'. It's just...hard, when folks leave, y'know?" She lifted her gaze up to him timidly.

"Yeah, it's hard." He looked away from her, rather shame faced. "We all make mistakes sometimes; things we regret. Don't make you wrong, just human." He offered her a faint smile. "All right?"

She nodded slowly, before flinging herself at him with the momentous enthusiasm of a puppy, wrapping her arms around him. "Don't make me leave too," she whispered, almost inaudibly.

Mal chuckled deeply as he caught her and held her, stroking her hair softly. "Ain't gonna make you leave, girl." He set her straight on her feet again and gave a wry grin. "Would take too long to train your replacement, anyway."

"An' to find someone who could make her run with no repair budget," she said, teasing him slightly, but watching still to see how he took it.

That invoked a deep sigh in him. "I'll get you some money, Kaylee. Think we can spare a little, what with the Lassiter sale goin' as well as it did. You make a list." After a second, he added, "But be practical!"

"I *am*," she said, beaming. "But the whole compression coil system needs an overhaul, and that takes parts!" She placed a friendly kiss on his cheek before rummaging under her hammock for the list that River always said should have been kept on a scroll, for as long as it was. Finding a pencil, she began humming and making stars next to the most important things.

Mentally Mal added up how much he figured that'd all cost, and wondered if he'd just signed away most of their savings. "You work on that girl, I best get down to the cargo bay 'fore we land. Ain't sure what else Jayne's got hid from me on this job."

Kaylee nodded, already lost in her dreams for her beloved ship. "*Xie xie ni*."

Mal left the mechanic to her list, heading down the stairs instead. He paused in front of the infirmary, then turned and knocked on River's door. It was open, and he could see the girl sitting inside on her bed, but for some reason he didn't want to barge in on her, like he had on . . . other people in the past.

River lifted her head, face not wholly friendly. She didn't say anything, just gazed at him, waiting for him to speak.

"You're gonna want to put a sweater on, little one. Spring's cold on Charon." He leaned against the doorway casually, glancing about her quarters. "Could probably use the like my own self," he absently added.

She looked down at her hands. "Sometimes I'm frightened. Or sorry," she said, plucking at her dress as though she could tease the words to compass her meaning out from it. "It isn't all swans on the water."

"No, it ain't. But that's life. You either learn to flow with it, or get pulled under and drown. Ain't much of a swimming man myself, but it's not so bad when you got yourself a ship and a good crew."

She sighed. "You don't listen." Glancing up at him, she repeated, "Sometimes *I'm* frightened, or sorry." She was struggling to express herself as she seldom did, to impress herself upon him. It was an exercise generally reserved only for Simon.

Mal tilted his head. "Ain't we all, on the occasion?" He could tell she wasn't pleased with the answer. "Well, what're you afraid of then?"

"Nothing, right now," she said slowly. "But sometimes I feel. You speak..." She rubbed her forehead fretfully. "Not a horse, or a dog. I hear the words."

Mal looked away from her, staring at the far wall of her room. "I'm only human, girl. We all make mistakes."

"I know," she whispered, then moved to lie flat on her stomach, draping herself over the edge of her bed to rummage around underneath it. "It's enough," she said, in a muffled voice, "if you do too."

"I do," he softly said. "Far too well."

She rose up, holding out the sweater in both hands. "I washed it again. It became a little smaller. Wants to mold itself to you."

He took it, but for a while didn't say anything. He just stared at the fabric, feeling it between his fingers. Then he simply said, "Thanks."

She nodded curtly, having already used up far more words than she usually did on him, and coiled herself back into her former position, serpentine and careful.

He wasn't quite sure what to say to her, then. If she'd been Kaylee, he'd have given her a quick hug, but River was all angles, and not terribly huggable, as far as he could see. "Hard to know how to talk to you, River Tam," he sighed. "But you're right. You ain't a horse, nor a dog, and you didn't deserve that. If any of your fear and sorrow was on account of me..."

A slow smile crossed her face, brightening it immeasurably. "Such airs he gives himself." She rose and moved towards the door. "It's time to go down."

The landing was smooth and simple with the air clear, crisp and traffic free. Wash set them down just outside of town, but by the time they lowered the cargo ramp, they already had a large group of eager townsfolk waiting to greet them. Mal, having since donned River's sweater, kept his eyes downcast from the ghostly planet hanging in the sky overhead as he stepped down to approach the head farmer.

"Tom Johnson—head of the farm collective here," the man said, stepping forward with his hand outstretched. "And I take it you're our salvation," he added with a little grin.

Some of Mal's gruffness wore off as he took in the delighted faces of the crowd. There were relieved expressions, excited ones, and anxious ones. There was one woman who was openly crying out of happiness. "Mal Reynolds," he replied. "And I don't know 'bout no salvation," he said amiably as he shook the farmer's hand, "but I got me a boat load of seed wanting to be in the ground mighty bad."

Turning, he gestured to Jayne and Zoe. "This is my crew. Jayne, Zoe," he nodded to them. "The rest'll come down in a bit. These two'll help you unload. Might work a bit faster if your folk'll give us a hand?"

Jayne grinned, then stepped up beside Mal. "Ain't we gonna get paid, first?"

Mal didn't look at Jayne, just smiled at the crowd. "We will, Jayne. We will."

"Sure will," Johnson said, digging in his pocket for the fairly sizeable bag of platinum. "We've had this here money saved up a long time. Ain't many ships willing to stop here, even if it's on the way. Can't say I don't understand, but it makes things hard sometimes."

Mal nodded and took the funds, watching as the cargo was unloaded. "It's good," he said finally, with a little smile. "We're glad to help."

"Hey, maybe your people'n you'd like to come to the planting festival? Girls've been decorating the maypole for days now, and there'll be food—real food, as best we got," Johnson said, slapping Mal on the shoulder.

Mal nodded. "I reckon my crew'll be glad to hear it. Terrible lazy bunch I got round here, and greedy," he added grinning, making sure Jayne and Zoe could hear him. He got no response from Zoe, and only a sort of nondescript leer from Jayne.

As soon as Mal told the rest of the crew about the planting festival, Kaylee, River and Wash nearly trampled him on their way out. He stood beside Zoe as he watched them enjoying the cool crisp air and pleasantries. They had homemade wine, and he made a mental note to buy a jug before they left to replace what he'd destroyed in his fit of pique.

"Glad we came," he admitted.

Zoe nodded, smiling a little as she watched River drag Kaylee towards the maypole, intent on joining the dance. "Nice place—deserves a chance for somethin' better." She gave Mal a sideways glance. "Glad you're feelin' better, sir."

Mal took a deep breath, closing his eyes as he did; the place smelt like Shadow. "Just needed some fresh air, I reckon." He opened his eyes, watching to see River skipping around the maypole with Kaylee while Simon watched from a distance, pleased. Jayne was chatting up some local women, and Mal thought perhaps things were going to go all right.

"Kind of like coming home," Wash lazily said as he sauntered up, slipping his arm through Zoe's. "Real nice place."

Johnson came up, his face wreathed in smiles. "Captain Reynolds, we'd all be real honored if you'd say a few words. All you done—well, we take it real kindly."

Mal was going to stammer some kind of denial, but the smiles on the faces of all assembled dissuaded him. This was no time to be retiring or withdrawn. It was time to be done with that, instead. He moved towards the center of the clearing and stepped up onto the old oak stump that served as a stand, feeling only a little silly.

He took in all the faces for a while; both unfamiliar mixed with familiar. His crew joined the townsfolk quickly. He could see Zoe and Wash out of the corner of his eye, standing there like twin rocks. Kaylee and River watched him with eyes that showed nothing but affection, while Simon sauntered up, still holding on to a bowl of some kind of root salad—it was always hard to get that man to let go of fresh food. Jayne even turned out, with a bright-eyed girl on his arm. After taking a deep breath, Mal cast his eyes to the sky, fixing them on the hazy husk of a planet that still loomed overhead, like a constant reminder of what they'd all lost.

"I was in this last war," he said slowly. "And I seen as well as anyone what the Alliance is capable of. They dealt death to my home and my people, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. Place like this, though...they can bomb you, and leave you out here on the edge of nowhere to starve, but they can't destroy it. Not so long as folk have the will to look forward and see their future, to rebuild stronger than before, with family and friends at their side. Home ain't never lost, not so long as there's hope and courage, and love to make people work together."

Mal's words hung in the quiet, thin air for some time, as he stood under the shadow of a dead world, surrounded by the future.